

# Albert Camus and Education

Aidan Hobson



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## PREFACE

I said that the world is absurd but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. (Camus, 1955a, p. 26)

From the moment absurdity is recognized, it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all. But whether or not one can live with one's passion, whether or not one can accept their law, which is to burn the heart they simultaneously exalt, that is the whole question. (p. 27)

A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it. (p. 35)

The six works interpreted in this monograph were considered over a 14 year period. However, five of the six chapters were written between 2013 and 2016, bringing together ideas that had percolated since the 2003 article I wrote on *Exile and the Kingdom*. Ideas had percolated because during that decade I had kept reading Camus. But more so because I had started to look for the absurd in education: beyond the philosophy towards practice. There were certain markers I was interested in: where I could see the emotions and feelings of the absurd in the behaviour of educators or learners, where I could see existential space deliberately being planned for, and where I noticed the language of existentialism in how people talked and what had been written down.

In this decade I was doing academic development and worked on approximately 250 qualifications from around 40 different industries. This work included course design from high school to doctorate level. It included qualifications from the academic, vocational and professional sectors. This exposed me to a significant number of learning contexts and educational management cultures (academic, corporate, community). Adding these experiences up, they gave me a very privileged insight into what people wanted from their educational experience:

- what they wanted to learn
- how they wanted to learn
- how that learning would be utilised (work, community, family, self)

I am still yet to have my first conversation within an academic development forum about how best to deal with existential anxieties, the sense of strangeness, the feeling of being an outsider; how to engage and care for this as a teacher. There have certainly been many conversations which have come close and these normally related to physical and psychological learning difficulties and how curriculum can engage and respond positively to research showing new ways of understanding learning and teaching. New research has significantly reshaped how educators over the last 20 years plan and deliver learning. The change I have seen has typically responded to emerging behavioural research about how learning happens – and consequently what learning design needs to look like.

But still absent from this (very positive, student-centred movement) has been the world of existentialism, specifically existential anxiety and how educators can connect with the experience.

The recurring absence of this discussion indicated to me that the absurd was not a significant feature on the learning landscape. But I experienced in my work two constant contradictions which meant, for me, Camus remained of interest. The first was the contradiction between the absence of explicit educational-existential conversations *compared* to what I heard when I talked to educators, workplaces and learners about their aspirations for pedagogy. When they described what they hoped for from education the purpose was almost always existential; a device and journey for choice, well-being, community, fraternity, family, change, authenticity. It struck me that they wanted the journey which Camus had written about but did describe it in those terms. The language of Camus would not fit with the discourse of academic development.

I had the same impression when I saw the language that qualifications were written in and how they were marketed. Although this is the discourse of credentialism, it was often embedded in language which referred to shifting consciousness, whether it be towards self, community, or more broadly some sort of self-actualisation. Although I recognised that some of this language was just marketing, it still reinforced to me the sense that there was a special place in education for the existential, the absurd, strangeness and the outsider. Perhaps characterised slightly differently but nevertheless the principles were there.

So this monograph is for those who are interested in connecting with these education ideals but connecting them in a different way to the philosophical and literary traditions they are part of. It is about furthering the case for

strangeness as an important characteristic of postmodern education. It is about also explicitly situating the writer: interpreting Albert Camus as having something to say to education about conditions and challenges it is facing.

Analysis of the following six works form my interpretation of Camus and education. Although there is much overlap and duplication of messages, there is a slightly different weighting given to each of the chapters:

1. *The Myth of Sisyphus*: how education is connected with the absurd and why the absurd has a special place in education
2. *Exile and the Kingdom*: the sorts of relationships needed in education for existential questions and experiences to emerge
3. *The Outsider*: the principles and outcomes of a pedagogy of the absurd
4. *The Rebel*: the practices themselves
5. *The Fall*: the feelings and emotions inside this pedagogy
6. *The Plague*: how to stay vigilant towards this pedagogy and consequence of not doing so.

It's hard to know what the impact of talking about the stranger might be for current educational debate or practice. The rise and fall of the influence of existential thinking in educational planning has been ongoing, for some time. However, there seems some original opportunities within this publication:

- a first-time analysis of a set of Camus' major works through the lens of pedagogy
- a new argument for the absurd in education, and education for the absurd
- a summary of this debate to date
- a new interpretation of Albert Camus as a writer of significant educational value.

There are some caveats to this project. The first is recognition that Camus wouldn't have advocated a pedagogical system based on his work – as perhaps we are doing here. Camus was always resistant to this type of construction and naming. Camus throughout his work demanded action which merged principles and context. He rejects principles and models which are not subject to the moment. This monograph tries to walk the tightrope between provocation and advocacy.

Camus would also be reluctant to use the term 'absurd' as a central feature of a pedagogy or way of living or learning. Following early publications and in interviews he made it clear the term, as a descriptor for his work, was problematic for him. However his focus on exploring the consequences of

the absurd remained throughout his work. He wrote about how people act when faced with the absurd (often through metaphor), and these descriptions are what we follow in this monograph. These descriptions are what we use to understand the behaviour and interpret what it looks like in an educational context. Less focus is given to unpacking exactly what the absurd is, its connection to other writers and concepts, and its metaphysical-philosophical validity.

Another caveat is around the use of the two terms outsider and stranger (and perhaps strangeness). These terms are used interchangeably when I am drawing on characteristics they have in common. Sometimes strangeness will be used to reinforce the physical or emotional experience. I also link both stranger and outsider to the absurd in a range of ways, which doesn't reflect the complexity of the concepts and the contestability of the interrelationship. Camus himself never offered this level of analysis to his readers. It seems he wasn't doing this in his writing. He instead preferred the freedom to explore, across a range of styles and forms, the experience of disjuncture. He was more interested in giving us the story of the absurd in all its diversity, perhaps more so than naming it and treating it (and perhaps defending it) in an academic or philosopher's manner. Given this the reader will have to accept a fair amount of slippage, interplay, and flexibility across these terms.

And the last caveat is that this monograph is about Camus's absurd, stranger, outsider and rebel. It is not analyses of the outsider in general. It does not provide an interpretation of what could be the pedagogy of Sartre's outsider for example, or the outsider of Hemingway or Barbusse. This monograph contains itself to what Camus can tell us about pedagogy in the context of *his* outsider characters.

This monograph has also tried, in keeping with much of the work of Camus, to be non-judgemental towards those (educational systems or people) who choose not to build or confront the stranger. Educators and learners have a lot going on and this monograph shouldn't be read as a *demand* for the absurd. The aim is for this publication to support positive transitions, relative to contexts of practice. This means it could be read as something enabling which might be used by a broad range of educationalists *who feel they are ready* to consider deeply the place and purpose of the stranger in their own professional practice.

In conclusion this monograph came from a curiosity. I was wondering *what the pragmatic consequences* would be for educators if we agreed on three things:

- that the absurd in some form is real in education and present now, and
- we know what type of questions, worries, processes, reactions make up this experience for the young mind, and
- we care about the type of educational and educator engagement this state of mind and body needs.



# INTRODUCTION

## THE PEDAGOGY OF ALBERT CAMUS

The realisation that life is absurd cannot be an end, but only a beginning. This is a truth that nearly all great minds have taken as their starting point. It is not the discovery that is interesting, but the consequences and rules for action that can be drawn from it. (Camus, 1968, p. 205)

This monograph analyses six major works by Albert Camus. Our analysis asks the same question in the context of each work: *what does the absurd mean for educational practice and theory?* If strangeness is something that is experienced in and through education this question becomes central. It demands we consider how best to connect or respond to existential strangeness within our own education practices – potential gain, harm, and synergy. For anyone interested in considering their practice in light of stranger commentaries it is hoped this interpretation of the major works of Albert Camus are a meaningful grounding for understanding the mentality, decision-making and action of the outsider, the experience and value of the absurd.

The work of Albert Camus gives us the opportunity to consider ‘consequences and rules for action’. This monograph assumes education has long discovered the absurd but it might benefit from being reminded of its presence – and hence call to action – from time to time. This is one guide for that reflective process. Via metaphor, motif, and symbolism the works of Albert Camus offer us one way of seeing and caring for the absurd and its stranger in education.

The following analysis of six texts by Albert Camus suggests the absurd gives rise to a range of concepts, principles and lessons that have positive and reciprocal relationships with the goals and practice of education. The absurd is educational and the absurd already lives in education. The analysis of how to respond to this is done with reference to characters found in Camus’s fictional work. These interpretations – *for the education practitioner* – are also informed by other writers on Camus. This related body of work is diverse in terms of where writers are from; disciplines, audience, purpose. As a result this monograph records the *application* of Camus; there is a malleability in his work that actively encourages readers to re-locate his ideas. The aim of this monograph is to bring to one place these stories, and by doing so provide

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a comprehensive story of the relationship between Camus and educational theory and practice to date. And alongside this produce an original reading of his major works through the specific lens of outsider pedagogy.

One result of this is a call to education that it should consider critically how the work of Camus is currently engaged through practice, and in turn, what new ways are available to understand and connect with it. This is a wholly practice-focused question. The case is made that the experience of strangeness is present already in education and has a special and enduring relationship to education. And on this basis, when practitioners are considering their work, it seems that Camusean concepts and stories around strangeness might offer them access to this unique world, one of extraordinary potential, for both harm and enlightenment.

Each of the six Camus works are explored through this lens. The reader will find some duplication as a result. The same language is used, the same conclusions are reached, the same methodology applies. Similar lessons, messaging and interpretations for pedagogy are gleaned. This might feel repetitive at times. But the point is not to reiterate these messages, rather it is to try and show there is something coherent and sustained across the body of work which can be utilised for educational thought. I am stopping short of saying that Camus offers us *a pedagogy* but for those interested in exploring the absurd and practice then the works of Camus could be our best starting point.

Finally, while there is evidence that Camus considered questions of educational practice, substantial interpretive licence has been taken here to extend this towards a “coherent” set of principles. So what it is undertaken here is the attempt to interpret a pedagogy through a set of literary works, in order to understand how to engage a real phenomenon (the experience of strangeness). This means building and describing pedagogy through metaphor, imagery, symbolism. These signposts describe a range of human endeavours, responding to a specific consciousness and condition, which has significant relevance today in education contexts. Hopefully coming out of literature rather than the educational sciences, increases, rather than reduces, the application and interest.

## USING CAMUS FOR EDUCATIONAL REFLECTION

Of the six chapters in this publication four have been adapted from published articles, and two are original. The same writing/interpretive process is repeated across each of the six works. The analysis looks for key stranger

concepts/moments/tensions in each of the texts (both literal references and symbolic) and then unpacks them in terms of (1) how they might exist in educational settings, and (2) how practitioners might engage them, and (3) how they might feel or exist for a learner.

Strangeness is often easy to spot in the work of Camus. For this reason the application of his work to education is instructive: I can see his characters in my classroom, and I can see their struggles in my own practice. Camus has unintentionally created a portrait of my classroom.

Of course Camus doesn't give us the whole picture – I believe his offer to education and his value for reflection on practice is limited to one particular motif and condition we find in education: that is the absurd, and the sense of strangeness and the outsider. So the analysis here tries to find these key moments and unpack his descriptions of them: the setting, physical and emotional impact, the learning that arises, and the metaphysical lessons. From these Camus shows us what the stranger experience looks like. We are now taking this experience and interpreting it within the education context. We explore what this experience the experience looks like, how to respond, and how to understand its potential.

Fortunately Camus's use of metaphor means much of his work has unique ambiguity, and therefore it encourages multiple and varied interpretation. It lacks a belligerence towards key philosophical concepts. As outlined in The Preface the chapters in this monograph do the same thing; there is a flexibility between concepts for the purpose of style, which certainly breach convention.

This position means this isn't a book about concepts – it is an argument for using a writer in an original way. The aim is to make the case first, and then let others, more versed in rules than I am, to take the next, much more analytical steps. But by deliberately copying the way Camus himself worked with language, this style might better encourage the new reader to make malleable, semi-permanent connections between their emerging understandings of the outsider/stranger/absurd experience – and their particular contexts for practice. The threshold here is deliberately low so as to allow comparison and curiosity.

This is a Camusean trait; there is an openness to his writing that allows for application. This is perhaps its appeal across so many cultures and conversations. It has synergies across discourses which means his work can run alongside other philosophies and concepts without creating an either/or response. For this reason it continues to have widespread appeal. It continues to get considered and its purpose *is to be applied*. Of course this lends (and

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did lend) itself to criticism on the grounds that the purpose of writing, if not pointed enough, cannot effect the change it intends. But I believe Camus was rarely concerned with a purpose beyond positive provocation. Because of this he does not meet certain methodological standards. But perhaps this is the best reason for re-thinking his work in the context of education. Engaging literature has the capacity for provocation and reflection, perhaps far greater than *proper* educational research offers.

In summary this book takes its starting point from the quote above. It assumes that education has already discovered the absurd. The task now is to explore what education should do with it. There is some space dedicated here to explaining why education and the absurd necessarily co-exist. But largely the interpretations of Camus's work assumes education has already stepped off the precipice and is living with the absurd and the stranger. These interpretations do not take a position whether education should do more or less in response. They are written for the curious practitioner wanting to know more.

## STRUCTURE

### *The Myth of Sisyphus*

In this chapter the educational themes in *The Myth of Sisyphus* are explored. This is done with reference to a number of others who have written on Camus, a small but important number of whom are from the educational philosophy discipline. The vast majority are not. Both groups have drawn insights from Camus from a number of different academic lenses and professional contexts. Analyses and applications range from the creative arts, to public health, to foreign policy to community development.

This body of work gives us a number of themes, a selection of which help us read Camus in a way that is relevant and useful for thinking differently about education. Illumination of these themes in *The Myth*, of interest to education, centre on the interrelationship between the absurd and the process of learning:

I want to know, one of my deepest desires is to know, but the world is resistant to this kind of intelligibility. (Foley, 2008, p. 6)

And when (I) consciously make this observation I experience the absurd.

This chapter explores why this experience is relevant to education. Some readers will naturally gravitate to the stranger and see it as having a very special relationship to education. There will be others who will not see the

concept in education at either a practical or philosophical level. This will also mean a varied enthusiasm for the following chapters where the investigations focus on the treatment, construction, creation, care and responsibilities for outsider pedagogy. This chapter finishes with the affirmation that *we can see education as absurd and the absurd as educational*.

### *Exile and the Kingdom*

This chapter is adapted from an article published in 2003 (Curzon-Hobson, 2003). *Exile and the Kingdom* is a set of stories that are colourful, vibrant and penetrating. They feature storylines and contexts that are rarely, if at all related to formal education settings. Instead they are urban, social, foreign, and personal. They all tell the story of absurd awakening for individuals and communities. The question underpinning this chapter is what can and should we import from *Exile* that will support more positive student experiences of the absurd. This analysis, drawing on the work of Martin Buber, offers the educator significant insight into the *type of relationship* that is part of a safe and meaningful journey into and out of the absurd. Solidarity is the centre of this experience. Implications for pedagogy are explored and described with reference to Paulo Freire.

### *The Outsider*

This chapter was originally published in 2013 as part of an *Educational Philosophy and Theory* collection (Curzon-Hobson, 2013a). This article started at a slightly different point from *Exile* but applied the same method, that is; if we agree that Camus's absurd is real and exists in education what does this mean for our practice. If the outsider is here, what do we do with it? A blueprint for pedagogy based on *The Outsider* quickly turns to the importance of ambiguity, doubt, strangeness and dialogue. The chapter explores this pedagogy and connects it with language and practice we find in learning and teaching discourses. By doing this the chapter tries to generate interest in the close proximity between influential educational writing and concepts found in Camus. In turn helping readers feel more comfortable (and confident) to locate the stranger in their own education context, and consider the consequences of remaining conscious and deliberate towards the phenomenon. The article finishes by summarising the positive and unique additions which strangeness and the stranger might have to offer education. Analysis of *The Outsider* through an education lens suggests strangeness

is educative. The stranger embodies qualities we want in our educated, and education wants to develop attributes that the experience of strangeness does (perhaps better than anything else). In this way the article starts to advocate for a pedagogy of the outsider.

### *The Rebel*

*The Rebel* offers Camus's most detailed portrait of the heroic response to mortal injustice and metaphysical absurdity. The rebel substantially extends the (teacher) portrait given to us in the first three chapters. This chapter was originally published as an article in 2013 (Curzon-Hobson, 2013b). It focuses on the teacher and the type of practice that could positively engage the absurd and the stranger. It focuses on whether the concepts and characteristics of *revolt* and *the rebel* can legitimately connect with educational practice and discourse. What is suggested is that these connections add a radical and overtly positive dimension to strangeness and specifically the absurd confrontation.

*The Rebel* also shows the importance of limits. In particular understanding how limits can mediate reaction to the absurd and how consciousness of limits can enable us the confidence to positively explore existential strangeness. These are interpreted here as educational journeys – hence the question of pedagogy arises: who walks alongside during this journey? The chapter traces those characteristics of revolt and the rebel which appear relevant to the monograph's emerging outsider pedagogy.

### *The Fall*

This chapter was first published in 2016, again as an article in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (Curzon-Hobson, 2016). It interprets *The Fall* as a story about manipulative, authoritarian pedagogy. This is illustrated through two storylines: a story of self-accusation (the teaching of self), and the parallel accusation of everyone else (the teaching of others that they too can be judged). *The Fall* is interpreted as a story of a society ill at ease with itself. Its rules and norms constrain and discipline, jeopardising authenticity. In one man's struggle against this it has had a de-humanising effect and he seeks justice by manipulating others. This provides a portrait of a man who, having experienced the absurd, now finds himself and his society at odds with the world as he knew it and wanted it to be. He attempts to escape this lucidity. The singular focus of the monograph, reinforced through

monologue, gives us Camus' deepest exploration of an individual's *feeling of existential strangeness*. *The Fall* was chosen for this description of the "feeling". I believe this is a unique contribution to understanding outsider pedagogy. The symbol Camus uses to describe (and reference) this feeling is the medieval torture mechanism known as the little ease. Utilising the little ease gives us something additional to interpret pedagogy. Firstly the little ease uniquely captures the feelings of the mind and body as *awkward*, rather than hurt or broken; the whole self aches with absurd ambiguity. Secondly, by using the little ease, something historically used as an "educative space", the feeling of strangeness is linked to the physical context of learning and the physical nature of learning.

### *The Plague*

This story is about a town struggling with the recognition, treatment and life of plague. The narrator focuses his energy on recounting struggles related to changing consciousness of one's place and agency in the world, and the subsequent reaction around meaning and value. He encourages the reader to see the symbolic nature of plague and its consequence; how individuals, self and communities respond when suddenly deprived of meaning. In notes and interviews on this work Camus encouraged readers to see plague as symbolic. The interpretation here is that plague in Oran is symbolic of the absurd in education; how and why it lives in education, why it rises up, and how we might act when faced with it. The discussion asks what vigilance means for an educator and the consequences for deliberately turning towards or away from plague.

*The Plague* reminds us that the absurd is always present. The story shows us how we might respond – and metaphorically how education can choose to respond. It shows us the mind-set of a system, apparatus, and individuals actively turned towards plague. I believe for this reason *The Plague* offers something post-pedagogy; how a system needs to be vigilant, the characteristics of one that is not, and the nature and cost of this complacency. I believe this novel offers a warning and makes transparent lethargic and inauthentic behaviours, and it offers the hero and describes lucidity and action; the work of the rebel. Interpreting *Plague* as an educational text shows us that education does not have the option to evade the absurd – the latter is already and always present. It is often hidden and latent but also immediate and physical and real. *The Plague* shows us characters who respond to bacillus differently – prior, during and post disease. The story

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shows us the consequences for consciousness if we fail to take the absurd into proper account.

## STEPPING OFF

It seems fitting to start (and finish) this monograph with the following quote from *The Plague*. It is metaphorical, curious and subversive. It is a perfect snapshot capturing the complexity and joy of Camus's writing. But it also shows/signals/reminds us (this writer at least) of the humility and humiliation inherent within the educational condition. The physical and emotional experience of the absurd will always return and overcome our best educational endeavours without any necessary reason. That is because the absurd is inherent within any contemplation of meaning. As soon as we connect with knowledge of the world, the world itself gives rise to the absurd. Hopefully the work of Camus offers a pedagogy that can respond to this moment:

And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperilled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good: that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and enlightening of men, it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city. (Camus, 1948, p. 297)

## THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS

### THE BROAD AND ENDURING APPEAL OF THE CAMUSEAN ABSURD

Albert Camus' absurd continues to capture the imagination of a diverse audience. This interest has predominantly focused on *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The absurd in *The Myth* has been explored from a range of disciplines such as art (Gotz, 1987; Bennett-Hunter, 2009) and in fiction (Vaught, 2016) and across new media forms (for example the comic book style of Appignanesi and Zarate, 2015). It has been analysed from biographical (Kassoul & Maouga, 2006), literary (Davison, 1997) and philosophical perspectives (Bronner, 1999).

Analyses almost always find ambiguity in the way the absurd is defined by Camus (Shobeir et al., 2009) but the importance of the concept, for interpreting his work, remains:

In an effort to appropriately engage the moment in which he was situated, Camus worked out the implications of the metaphor of the absurd. It was through this metaphor that the world made sense to Camus. As his moment changed, he also began working with the metaphor of revolt. This should not be viewed as moving away from using the absurd but as adding further texture to his understanding of absurdity. (Sleasman, 2012, p. 7)

The 'moment' Sleasman is referring to influenced three works by Camus originally intended as a single volume: *The Myth*, *L'Etranger*, *Caligula* (Lottman, 1979, p. 248). The absurd found across these works (the importance given to it, use and meaning) received substantial attention from the literary world at the outset. A dozen key texts laid the foundation and reference points for the dialogue, often critical, which influenced debate for the first 15 years (for example Barthes, 1957; Bree, 1962; Cruickshank, 1960; Cruise O'Brien, 1970; Hanna, 1958; Kauffmann, 1959; Lauer, 1960; Sartre, 1962; Thody, 1961).

As part of the peer and public scrutiny of his work Camus reiterated a resistance towards his writing being associated with the absurd (Camus, 1968, p. 349). But this did not dent initial critical interest in Camus' treatment of the

concept and experience. From the mid-Seventies this interest has expanded; moving from the more philosophical analysis to one of application. What resulted was a significant move to apply Camus and his wider body of work to new contexts. For example, comparative analyses have now been made between his work, concepts of absurd and the idea as found in other writers; such as Dostoevsky (Krapp, 2002) in the work of Nietzsche (Sefler, 1974), more broadly across continental philosophers (Solomon, 1999), Karl Popper (Weyembergh, 1998) and with Levinas in regards educational questions (Roberts, 2013d). He also brought new dimensions to debates about moral education as the philosophical and pragmatic conversations adapted to poststructuralist influence (see for example Carter, 1984) and Camus has been utilised in discussions on the future of regional education policy and practice. See for example Lang (1998) in relation to Europe and Zhang (2010) in the context of China.

The flexibility of Camus to be applied for radical, interpretive purposes cannot be underrated and makes for a compelling case to keep widening readership into new contexts, such as education. By way of example, note the utility of applying the absurd to biomedical ethics, specifically the care of patients doing predictive testing:

To interpret her experiences, we refer to the concept of absurdity, developed by the French Philosopher Albert Camus. Camus' writings on absurdity appear to resonate with patients' stories when they talk about their body and experiences of illness. In this paper we draw on Camus' philosophical essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus', and compare the absurd experiences of Sisyphus with the interviewee's story. This comparison opens up a field of ethical reflection. We demonstrate that Camus' concept of absurdity offers a new and promising approach to understanding the fragility of patients' situations, especially in the field of predictive testing. (Porz & Widdershoven, 2011, p. 342)

And in other contexts, writers such as Brian Sleasman (2011) have systematically applied Camus and a critical reading of the concept of the absurd to their own professional practices in order to better understand present and future challenges around meaning and action in the postmodern condition. There is also a continuing body of work advocating for a re-reading of Camus and the application of ideas to contemporary cultural and artistic challenges (Shobeiri et al., 2007), problems, understanding of self, and rethinking the future direction of society (Foxlee, 2011; Francev, 2014; Maze, 2011; Margerrison et al., 2008; Sigley, 2011).

Others have explored in detail the politics of Camus and by doing so applied new insights to contemporary thinking; in the context of ethics see Robert Zaretsky (2010) and Emmanuelle Vanborre (2012); in relation to France and political transformation (Judt, 1998) or in the context of the politics of violence see Davis (2007). These types of publications, encouraging breadth and depth of reading Camus represent the upsurge in contemporary interest in the man and his writing. This interest continues to cross boundaries: a recent re-write/adaptation of *L'Étranger* by Kamel Daoud (2015) – *The Meursault Investigation* – found international success (100,000 copies translated into 28 languages); Camus has also been the subject of a new film – people interviewed from across the world on the impact of reading his work (Calmette, 2013); and he continues to interest the blogosphere (Maguire, 2015; Mitra, 2012). The ongoing and most recent rise in popularity of the work of Albert Camus is summed up by the Huffington Post:

recent Camus anniversaries, including the centenary of his birth (in 2013) and 50th anniversary of his death (2010), have also been observed energetically. I think it's fair to say that we're experiencing a veritable Camus moment, in which attention is not only being showered on the man himself, but on his fictional characters and his main ideas, which have been showing up with increasing frequency in books, films, and even newspaper columns. (Dobie, 2016)

#### THE EMERGING EDUCATIONAL INTEREST

There continues a corresponding rise in interest within educational circles. There is a greater quantity of writing, often re-connecting with older texts, and bringing to light a transdisciplinary approach to applying and investigating. Historically this conversation is thanks to two seminal texts. The work of David Denton in 1964 who set out the premise for investigation:

In regards to education, Camus' thought provides at least three conclusions. The first concerns the nature of education itself. Education, in its institutional form, can justify its existence only to the extent that it implements programs for the development of lucid individuals... The second conclusion follows from the first; the central purpose of education is to develop moral persons... The third... We must educate man because of what he is. (Denton, 1964, p. 99)

Denton's original contribution was followed by a series of publications by Maxine Greene. These broadly engaged the work by Camus, linking

these analyses to contemporary debates about existentialism and teaching. The foundational work is *Teacher as Stranger* (1973). Continuing work over thirty years kept returning readers to the absurd, often as part of criticising totalitarian approaches within education. A collection dedicated to Greene gives us a compelling insight into how she saw the connections (for practice) between the stranger and the educator, for example:

The teacher must be an active walker. Maxine Greene's (1973) teacher-as-stranger too must be free not necessarily of entanglement – it is the nature of living to be caught in the contradictory aspects of existence – but of being entangled and incapable of wresting free. It is in this capacity that the category of stranger served the teacher for it is in this looking awry that permits a critical glance. (Block, 1998, p. 18)

Other writers have provided foundational and significant insights into the links between Camus and education. These writers are referred to throughout this monograph. Their body of work continues to extend the influence of Camus. They include analyses on the concept of education and the educated person (Oliver, 1973) the potential relationship between Camus and other educational writers (Hendley, 1993), and the concept of learner (Felman, 1995). Others have used Camusean symbolism to highlight educational policy tensions (Fleming, 2003) or have applied Camusean principles to new education contexts such as management (Hjorth, 2003). Many have focused on political and power questions relating to education and questions of identity (Heraud, 2013) or have explored pedagogy (Burgh & Thornton, 2014), or have simply kept asking the question, on behalf of us all, about the relevance and interconnections between Camus, other outsider literature and education (Roberts, 2008a).

#### THE PREDOMINANT THEME: THE ABSURD AND PEDAGOGY

The above, diverse investigations have given us a range of perspectives and ways to think about Camus and education. I have been most interested in investigations which have insight for practice. And the part of this debate which offers a particularly rich offering (for thinking about practice) are those writers who have addressed the *absurd*; its physicality, psychology, imagery and metaphor. These normally address the complexity of the relationships between education and the absurd.

Sometimes the debate specifically addresses the word as Camus treated it, or it explores the challenge of the concept more generally. For example, a significant research project in the UK focussing on the 'absurd' as pedagogical

play still implicitly reveals important Camusean themes. In reviewing the role of the ‘absurd and carnivalesque’ researchers saw ‘kinds of play’ that ‘were profoundly serious in their intent and effect’ (Thomsen et al., 2012, p. 15). This research explored the character and impact of pedagogies used by creative practitioners as they visited schools through 2011. Researchers looked for the specific characteristics of these interactions which they believe promoted learning in the creative arts. Although these pedagogies didn’t explicitly reference Camus they have a number of similarities. These were called ‘signature pedagogies’ and they represented a significant challenge to the ‘default’ approaches the researchers saw in some schools:

Creative signature pedagogies open up ‘third spaces’ which are characterised by their hybridity, permeability, mobility and time flexibility’.

Practices within these third spaces are underpinned by:

- a universality approach to inclusion
- a commitment to genuine choice and agency
- a willingness to confront the challenges of scale and ambition
- a readiness to use and sanction the absurd and carnivalesque
- a focus on the lived experience of the present (p. 16).

The absurd is found elsewhere as part of the creative pedagogy debate. From creative arts we see a description of a teacher turning consciousness to the absurd as an educational device:

That’s really the point of the RATIONAL FUNK series; it’s an anti-instructional video series. By throwing the fallaciousness of pedagogical methods and an attendant music industry more interested in image and “content,” as opposed to world building human activity, into high relief, King takes the air out of the idea of buying chops, that there’s a right way to do anything. Two things that are repeatedly on the chopping block are pedagogy in general and the personal and social effects of neoliberalism’s commoditization of art. This roasting is done by magnifying the absurdity of what is the case. (Kluth, 2016)

In discussions on art education we find advocates for pedagogy which recognises the absurd and utilises a certain consciousness moment:

that is why the relationship between pedagogy and art is absolutely crucial, because pedagogy and education are about emphasis on the embodiment of the process, on the dialogue, on the exchange, on

intersubjective communication, and on human relationships. The product may or may not be necessary or important. But it cannot happen if this exchange does not take place. (Helguera, 2010)

This echoes the rich history of the creative arts and the theatre particularly, representing the absurd and deliberately providing the experience of the absurd for its audience. The experience can be educational. This is implied by Martin Esslin in his foundation article on the theatre of the absurd:

Each of these writers has his own special type of absurdity: in Beckett it is melancholic, coloured by a feeling of futility born from the disillusionment of old age and chronic hopelessness; Adamov's is more active, aggressive, earthy, and tinged with social and political overtones; while Ionesco's absurdity has its own fantastic knock-about flavour of tragical clowning. But they all share the same deep sense of human isolation and of the irremediable character of the human condition. (Esslin, 1960, p. 4)

A conversation on *guerrilla pedagogy* finds similar themes of disruption and self-reflection:

Of key importance, these strategies' effects may be unpredictable for all involved and, in this way, guerrilla pedagogy involves disruptive learning from below and from the side. Furthermore, the formation of communities, especially communities of dissensus, can be inaugurated through surprise rather than prescription. As such, guerrilla pedagogy dislodges the teacher's interpretive authority while re-positioning him or collective responsibility, and transformation. (Weems, 2013, p. 59)

The learner at the centre of guerrilla pedagogy has similarities to the 'nomad' and the 'vagabond' described by DeLeon – as examples of learner 'archetypes' that 'defy ideological and spatial constraints, exhibiting a uniquely anarchist subjectivity' (DeLeon, 2010, p. 35).

This type of language resonates with educational readings of Camus. The habitat of this language seems educational: Camusean characters have something special about their outsider relationships but they also have a closeness to others and a commitment to solidarity. Across these different writers the absurd has synergies with the big themes found in Camus: the absurd provides for positive and negative tensions often constituted through dialogue (which might be applied to Camus and his own life and his characters):

Camus exemplified existential dialogue: he attended to existence on its terms and responded on his...responsive humanism in action – never giving up, just getting tired, frustrated, sick, and then mobilising again. Existential dialogue is a communicative version of Sisyphus in daily action. (Arnett, 2016, p. 20)

A recent article by Wolken positioned this principle *into* the educational context; in turn advocating that the absurd has value as an educational experience, and we should unpack its pedagogical characteristics:

My modest attempt at responding to this challenge is to posit the absurd as holding value precisely given its constitutive ambiguity, impurity, and disruptive capacities. Moreover, and crucially, this is what is unique and intriguing about the way Camus advocates responding to the absurd. In a word, he insists on not only facing and living within the absurd but embracing a commitment to it; this is the absurd passion. (Wolken, 2016, p. 73)

Wolken goes on to synthesise a range of postmodern writing with synergies to the absurd to offer new insight regarding the nature of the learning and identity (under the absurd tension):

This action- and lucidity-sustaining tension is a key part of the ultimate value of the absurd for critical academics. To think the absurd is to maintain this tension, to respect the constitutive contingency of its animating characteristics. In dealing with issues of identity, the self/subject, the limits of reason, and historical dislocation, the absurd thinker confronts many of the same troublesome (yet potentially productive) features of the postmodern condition. (p. 76)

Wolken supports these ideas by referencing educational writing on Camus, for example Bowker (2014) and Skrimshire (2006) to highlight new synergies between the language of the absurd and influential contemporary discourses in education.

Positioning the absurd like this in education resonates with other writers. One of the most recent collections is *Education, Ethics and Existence* (Roberts et al., 2013), one of the first collections dedicated to Camus and education. This publication and a number of closely connected others (for example Burgh & Thornton, 2014; Curzon-Hobson, 2013; Gordon, 2016; Roberts, 2013a; Weddington, 2007) are referred to throughout this monograph. This body of work is a systematic provocation; that the absurd and senses of strangeness and the stranger are both an educational opportunity and an educational problem. We remain unsure exactly where it fits.

## THE IMAGERY OF SISYPHUS AND EDUCATION

The imagery of Sisyphus has been connected with education before. This discussion normally uses Sisyphus as a symbol for an education system being subjected and constrained under wider political and economic structures (see for example Eaton, 1990).

Other work focuses on the toil of teachers. In 1925 Siegfried Bernfeld wrote a book highly critical of education called *Sisyphus or The Limits of Education* and it used the character of Sisyphus to symbolise a number of tensions found in the teaching vocation. The parallel is made between how the gods treated Sisyphus, and how the “system” was treating teachers, to the point of making them automatons to serve a range of new political and psychological ideologies, and this was having dire consequences for learners:

Pedagogues have occasionally expressed themselves quite pessimistically about the capability of the child, so much so that they should really have declared the whole enterprise futile. My own view tends in that direction, but is not quite that bleak. Of course, under the influence of Darwinism, the doctrine of heredity, and determinist psychology it was easy enough to imagine that the course of the human life was pre-determined at the moment of conception. What followed seemed no more than a wound-up puppet show, and only those children who did not know of the mechanism and understand it could think that the puppets moved freely. (Bernfeld, 1973, p. 109)

In a similar way, almost 100 years later, Frederic Miller used the ‘futile and hopeless labour’ of Sisyphus to critique the rise of policy that he believed undermined genuine educational ideals and the work of teachers:

Noting that “one always finds one’s burdens again,” Camus concludes that “the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. Therein lies the danger—the temptation to retrieve our rock and start contentedly back up the mountain.” To avoid the fate of Sisyphus, we may need a different rock; we may even need a different mountain. We certainly ought to think about it. (Miller, 2000, p. 236)

The imagery of Sisyphus as brave and fighting against the odds is also used by Gene Glass (referencing Bernfeld) to highlight the increasing challenges teachers were facing in contemporary society. The question he poses is philosophical suicide: how, against the odds and without adequate support can

teachers continue to make positive impact and therefore retain an important role in communities?

Bernfeld likened the task of the teacher to the labors of Sisyphus: arduous work over long periods of time against huge odds, both psychological and environmental. Of course, the modern myth is that Teacher is Zeus – all powerful, able to accomplish any goal, hence if the Teacher fails, the Teacher is entirely to blame; and in the end, there are severe limits to what any teacher can accomplish. (Glass, 2014)

Sisyphus has also represented the wider education system struggling under macro- economic and political change:

Like the labors of Sisyphus, China seems consigned to a never-ending struggle out of underdevelopment. Whether Deng's [education] reforms are sufficient to propel China in the ranks of industrialised nations remains to be seen. (Chang, 2009, p. 18)

And in the context of Special Education as it struggles to find purchase in the wider political arena:

Sisyphus was compelled to roll a huge rock up a steep hill, but before he could reach the top of the hill, the rock would always roll back down, forcing him to begin again. Special education seems to suffer from the maddening nature of the punishment reserved for Sisyphus, binding it to an eternity of reform and frustration. (Alter, 2010)

The specific phrase *pedagogy of the absurd* has been used by critics of education policy, arguing that the consequences of proposed initiatives are detrimental to sound learning principles. The word absurd has been used as imagery for critique; that an initiative/approach will result in something meaningless, not connected with reality, or will jeopardise what is valued. Using 'absurd' to achieve this emotive affect in readers is a powerful device. See for example Ken Goodman who over a period of ten years regularly referred to a pedagogy of the absurd; using it as part of a critique of American education policy (2011), the move to online schooling, reading testing approaches and whole language policy:

And in the future wise men and women will look back on this period in education as that of the pedagogy of the absurd in which invalid and unworkable methods and materials were the law of the land and sound and sane pedagogy was forbidden. (2005, p. 286)

In a more positive way the character and travail of Sisyphus, has been used to symbolise humanist role models and educational ideals:

Only through the discipline of an education in arts and sciences can human intervention become equal to nature and enable individuals to come to terms with the physical, moral, and intellectual burdens that have been imposed on them. Like Sisyphus' labour with his rock-burden, Erasmus and Vives assert that human beings are divinely obliged to acquire knowledge, learn virtuous behaviour, and comprehend the sanctity upon which all intelligence rests even though that obligation may be beyond their capabilities. (Simon, 2007, p. 161)

Elsewhere the imagery of Sisyphus has been used to support, or bring to life, critique and commentaries across other educational contexts. See for example John Franklin (2003) in the U.S. context of school funding and class size debates, Lowyck (2005) and Mahoney (2015) in relation to the utility and use of technology in education. Other publications explore (and present positions) in regards education's response to professional changes that make labour and learning a Sisyphian-like encounter.

These commentaries come from a range of professional contexts. See for example (Akhter, 2014; Conrad, 1981; Cheville, 2012; Haines, 1988; Hecht, 2015; Hjorth, 2003; Merrim, 2011; Puolimatka & Airaksine, 2001). This type of Sisyphian symbolism in educational discourses can be divided into two types; sometimes it is used to represent education's struggle within a wider political system, in other instances it is the struggle for new educational needs to be heard within the education system itself.

## EDUCATION AND SISYPHUS

There is also a third body of work that has explored the psychology of Sisyphus and the links to feelings and emotions we find in education. Reviewing the Peter Roberts (2013f) article about the role of despair in education (itself relevant to *The Myth*), Kip Cline writes:

The kind of despair education produces, for Roberts, is generative in two ways. First, it provides us with a kind of coping mechanism. Education may be risky because it opens us to an existence of perpetual unease, but it also offers compensation in the form of a way to navigate the despair into which it leads us...It turns out that despair is meliorative. Without it, we end up falling for cheap antidotes to our problems and sufferings. With it, we press on like Sisyphus, willing

to commit ourselves to noble ends even though we never reach them.  
(Cline, 2013, pp. 277–288)

These types of publications reinforce the sense that Camus could be understood as an educational writer and that he is talking (or can be made to talk) to the classroom.

For example, in *The Myth* Camus writes about those who explored, who sought to reconcile, create and live within the absurd. *The Myth* describes that type of life as a vocation; one which for the absurd man ‘is not a matter of explaining and solving, but of experiencing and describing’ (p. 87). This imagery is explored throughout this monograph. Writing to date has helped us to see the absurd, as we find it in *The Myth* holding promise for education. The experience of the absurd and the labour of Sisyphus may be solitary but like education it also has a collective dimension as it recognises – and is embedded in – what is common. Sisyphus works as an individual but through this connects to the cause of others (Carroll, 2007). This imagery of Sisyphus has appeal for educationalists striving to bring this balance to their practice contexts; lucidity of the absurd has potential to bring the individual and the collective together in a powerful and unique way.

Explored here is the nature of this relationship between the absurd and education, in the context of a wider political system, and the consequences for practice: for the learning, the learner and teacher. The following quote lays out this challenge and the opportunity:

While the mechanical life of education as an enterprise may produce weariness and thus provoke a consciousness of the absurdity of one’s relation to life, the world itself is not absurd. Rather the world itself is unreasonable. Furthermore, it is not education as an enterprise that is absurd, but rather that the enterprise ethos pretends to be reasonable in the way it configures the experience of the educator/student relationship; a mechanical life that is wearisome to both educator and student because it fails to recognise the more profound nature of the relation between the need for political subjectivity and creative activity. The absurd embodies the confrontation between the irrational (the pragmatic act from the point of view of what pragmatism does not recognise in the subject of education) and the subject of education’s wild longing for clarity. The context of this confrontation is that in which we visualize the need in contemporary education for an interaction between the educator and the student that produces a disagreement. (Gibbons & Heraud, 2007)

EDUCATIVE FEELINGS

The language of absurdity can sit uneasily alongside typical educational imagery. For example Camus describes creation embedded in *humiliated* thought. He sees creativity as ‘dogged revolt’ and advocates that ‘any thought that abandons unity glorifies diversity’ and that ‘diversity is the home of art’ (105). The happiness of Sisyphus itself is confirmed on the basis that he accepts his fate and everything within it. From Baldaccino’s reflections on the work of Maxine Greene:

To take on one’s burden is neither humiliating nor denigrating, but humanizing. This is what gives Sisyphus a unique existence... Sisyphus is not distanced from what Camus calls the artist’s difficult calling. (Baldaccino, 2009, p. 19)

Our inquiry is whether education can look like this, wants to look like this or perhaps needs to look like this. Should it embed this kind of futility into the creative process, and what are the consequences of doing so? How does education already do this, and what might be the opportunities and risks of bringing this pedagogy into practice?

It seems education takes its place on both sides of the absurd pendulum. It is an instrument of totality and an instrument of diversity. It can be used for opening or closing the mind curious to the absurd. Education can offer both strangeness and certainty. Literature on the subject to date suggests it cannot easily escape the ambiguity of knowledge nor the experience of strangeness, nor the temptation for totality. Its currency is the same as the absurd; sense making between knowledge, self and existential purpose. It therefore lives close to the absurd. The experience of the absurd might look like what many would call educational:

born precisely at the very meeting point of that efficacious but limited reason with the ever-resurgent irrational. (Camus, 1955a, p. 39)

If education lives close by to the absurd we can potentially learn much by reading Albert Camus. We would have more guidance for the choices we need to make. His characters and contexts show us different ways to respond and live authentically in the absurd – perhaps increasingly relevant or helpful for engaging for postmodern ambiguity. They show the life that the absurd gives rise to, and by doing so how to live meaningfully when faced with our own Sisyphian moments.

*The Myth* is the required starting point for these provocations. It offers us a story of those historical and fictional characters who lived cognisant

of the ‘futility of one’s efforts’. Although critical, *The Myth* advocates the power (of this type) of ephemeral creation.

This is a restoration of a voice and the individual struggle ‘in the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up’ (p. 110). For Camus this relies on the individual recognising that not all has been ‘exhausted’ (p. 110). It is perhaps a special space that the Outsider (pedagogy) can inhabit and create within.

*The Myth* has always been considered an argument for the absurd and in particular the strength of character that may come with its confrontation. Read in this way *The Myth* is the argument for one’s committed confrontation to the absurd, not as an end in itself or an appeal to some type of existential truth but rather as a mechanism for authenticity. Camus sees the absurd as a reality provided to consciousness, experienced (deliberately or not) under certain conditions which individuals choose to engage or turn away from. *The Myth* outlines why the absurd is valuable; what the strength of character is, and why this character is essential to our societies. He arrives at ‘ephemeral creation’:

For Camus, art is a paramount way of living under the shadow of the absurd. Consequently the artist is the most absurd character Camus deals with in his writings. (Gotz, 1987, p. 265)

This monograph explores whether a teacher can be this type of artist – and whether it is sustainable – bringing the absurd to education experienced as a combination of difficult feelings. These feelings are relational ones such as dislocation, exile, solidarity, euphoria. *The Myth* traces these feelings. The remainder of this chapter introduces some of these concepts and begins the examination of whether they can be understood as educational and perhaps under what conditions they already exist or exist positively in educative spaces.

#### EXILE

The feeling of exile is central to most conversations to date on education and Camus. In *The Myth* exile is not a total revolt against meaning (a type of nihilism). It is more a feeling that one is in a new place. The rules and assumptions in this place are ambiguous. They can be accompanied by the sense that things are no longer ‘worth the trouble’ (p. 13). *The Myth* states that from the moment the absurd is recognised, and it is recognised as belonging to I, it is a passion which is ‘the most harrowing of all’ (p. 27). In *The Myth* this is where ‘contradiction, antinomy, anguish or impotence reigns’ (p. 28). It is at the outer limits of reason: ‘the mind, when it reaches its limits, must make a judgement and choose its conclusions’ (p. 31).

Experiences of the absurd and the sense of exile and the Outsider are not all consuming, and unlikely constant; they are ‘privileged and bitter moments’ (p. 31). *The Myth* asks us whether we choose ‘philosophical suicide’ at these times. It provokes action in readers by describing the stories of others. It asks what we as individuals, or our institutions would do. How should we respond – when choice is not an option – the absurd must be reckoned with: ‘living under that stifling sky forces one to get away or stay’ (p. 32). *The Myth* describes the ‘incalculable feeling’ of exile:

- a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights
- no memory of and no way back to the world of meaning
- divorce between the actor and his setting (p. 13).

These feelings are one consequence from dealing with the absurd – exile of this type does not end well for many Camusean characters. *The Myth* explores how other writers have considered this question, particularly the first encounter and the question of fear and consequence: if I go down this path ‘what would life be but despair?’ (p. 43).

Educationalists are encouraged to accept this challenge and explore consequences for practice. This is advocating for the place of the absurd but recognising the precipice it walks. But utilising Camus allows us to signpost where emotional and physical danger might be, and where the promise might lie. His characters offer us alternative ways of seeing the teacher and student, interactions, policy and principle. They have aspects of the rebel and the outsider that might appeal as metaphors or literal models for what we want to see (and perhaps even need) in education.

This is where *The Myth* starts: with the simple question of what counts and what does not and the challenge of whether we should step into the equilibrium of the absurd and risk emotions, those such as exile. *The Myth* in many ways demands we must. It opens with this one ‘truly serious philosophical problem’ – the judgement of whether (the curious) life is worth living or not – under the gaze of the absurd. The question for Camus was whether the absurd challenge *only* leads to nihilism, or if it also leads to alternative, positive ways of being, seeing and knowing.

#### THE ABSURD

In all these cases, from the simplest to the most complex, the magnitude of the absurdity will be in direct ratio to the distance between the two terms of my comparison. (p. 33)

This passage from *The Myth* suggests that where there is no significant investment in certainty and control there can no absurd. Or put differently, the absurd arises within those contexts where there exist apparatus investing in meaning-making. For example Camus's stories such as *The Plague* would not make sense if set in a community of Dadists or Behemians. It would be a story of illness rather than tragedy. The absurd requires air to breathe. This air comes from the human feelings of space found between certainty and ambiguity. The space where education also lives, from time to time.

There are very few institutions in our society which give energy to both ends of this confrontation or 'divorce' as *The Myth* phrases it: institutions which permit (and can reward) both certainty and consciousness of the uncertain. Normally our social experiences are clearly signposted as sense making or nonsense making: as taking the trouble versus trouble making. Institutions will rarely allow us to play at both ends of the spectrum.

However education, unlike other meaning-making apparatus, is licensed to generate both feelings simultaneously; the promise and the doubt. It humiliates and constructs. It encourages the knower to believe in the potential for knowledge to explain, and yet also rewards fragility – meaning we are cognisant that knowledge will be overcome. Education is unique because it encourages (and rewards) us to act through knowing *and yet* refuses to allow us a certainty to this learning. It asks us to roll the rock but in full consciousness that our efforts will be overcome. This has a very particular psychological effect on learners and learning. They are rewarded for learning but remain suspicious of it.

These two feelings are also contained in the absurd, longing met with ambivalence. That they cannot be divided is a defining principle. It results in an awkward balance. Camus explores what it means to live with this consciousness:

the first and, after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me. (p. 34)

*The Myth* traces this nexus and the "leap" of other writers and characters in fiction. Camus demands we stay true to the paradox. He sees the absurd as that which defines him – and binds him – his answers to ethical and existential questions are mediated through this awkward space.

The absurd challenge in the context of education might look something similar. For the mind imbued with the absurd doesn't education look like a charade? A rock-like meaningless activity? Or can this mind still find meaning – can Sisyphus have both the rock and happiness; can education

have both the absurd and purpose. This phrase in *The Myth* puts the challenge succinctly, and I believe it looks like education:

    this mind and this world straining against each other without being able to embrace each other. (p. 42)

### LIMITS

In the Cruise O'Brien translated 1955 publication of *The Myth*, Penguin included the story *Helen's Exile*. This short story has relevance for educational questions too. It gives imagery to 'this mind and this world straining against each other'.

This imagery comes from the way Camus writes about the 'limits' which he found characteristic of Greek thought, and that he found the modern era turning away from. He sees them instead turning to totalities – and hence the negation of limits. Living through a time of extreme violence and revolt Camus longed for the resurrection of, or to get back in touch with, limits: 'Nemesis the goddess of measure keeps watch' (Camus, 1995b, p. 167). Camus doesn't describe his age as one believing in no limits but rather one without balance.

Adherence to limits means (or demands) a relative freedom and a relative justice; Foley sees Camus' concept of limits comparable to the Greek concept of *sophrosyne*: 'usually translated as either "moderation" or "temperance" [it] is one of the four cardinal virtues as defined by Plato in the *Republic* (Foley, 2008, p. 83). Because of this loyalty to, and demand for, limits Camus can locate himself in a unique political and moral context. He brings a different lens to analyses and ethical questions:

    In a drunken sky we light up the suns we want. But nonetheless the boundaries exist and we know it. In our wildest aberrations we dream of an equilibrium we have left behind and which we naively expect to find at the end of our errors. (Camus, 1955c, p. 168)

Camus believed that consciousness of limits allows recognition of and respect for diversity. It is not that Camus doesn't want totality, he describes and knows well the temptation of ideological sense-making for society. But he and his characters have 'glimpsed' the absurd and he believes in fidelity to this condition and the limits therein. The alternative for Camus is far worse. It is to eventually 'rule over a desert' (p. 168). Camus finds examples of this through history and explains these moments when 'we merely lack[ed] man's pride which is fidelity to his limits, lucid love of his condition' (p. 171).

How do limits and *Helen's Exile* speak to education? I believe the story reinforces the idea of learning as creation and discovery of limits. It mirrors some educational discourses advocating for learning to *retain a sense humility*, where limits are recognised and learning retains balance. Limits also re-position the purpose and role of the educator, ushering in the concept of balance; elevating to consciousness the sense of humility, collectiveness, and incompleteness. Limits therefore allow us to recover the absurd, which we should have known was always there waiting for us. And perhaps conversely, the absurd allows us to live conscious of limits.

### ABSURD REASONING

Is education, or should education, or can education be absurd? In turn can the absurd be educational? The question in *The Myth* is what *type* of reasoning follows the absurd awakening, and what the value is of this way of thinking. We know education sides with the absurd because it starts with the incomplete world. It also sides with the absurd because it deals in ambiguity. There is also, like the absurd, no nostalgia in education: its imperative is to overcome and in doing so retain an existential fragility.

Absurd reasoning 'aims to enumerate what it cannot transcend' and in doing so it affirms 'that without any unifying principle thought can still take delight in describing and understanding every aspect of experience' (p. 45). This description is taken from the critique of phenomenology in *The Myth*, and in this passage Camus is signalling there are many things within phenomenology that make it appear on the side of absurd reasoning. He agrees that it is 'a way of awakening a sleeping world and of making it vivid to the mind' and that it has a 'modesty of thought that limits itself to describing what it declines to explain' (p. 45). The step the method takes, siding with the absurd is to reject a unifying principle that allows us to describe experience without recourse to reason; to see the diversity of an image mediated by the moment and consciousness: 'in that magic lantern all the pictures are privileged' (p. 45).

But Camus rejects Husserl's method on the basis that it takes a step that for the absurd mind is 'incomprehensible'. The step is the one where phenomenology moves from a psychological attitude to the metaphysical. If Husserl was offering only a self-imposed focus for critical consciousness it would have similarities to absurd reasoning. But Camus rejects it on the basis that it is more than just a way of looking at the world. It implies that through a certain, psychological lens one can claim to discover the essence

of an object. The reasoning may look like it is energised by the absurd but its outcome is not. It eventually falls to the temptation of explaining, and the explanation assumes, or wants to purport, a metaphysical truth.

We might use this same method to see if education also fails the Camusean test. The test is whether education remains true to the absurd or not. This can be explored by asking three questions:

- the level to which epistemologies in education see, consider, or embrace the absurd
- the level to which learning journeys bring individuals into contact with the absurd, and
- where the absurd is experienced outside education contexts; to what extent does education then respond to these moments as they are carried into its context.

The first two questions are about how education (knowledge and then pedagogy) is deliberately designed to connect with the absurd. The third question is how education engages personal experiences of the absurd that happen elsewhere – and yet remain present to the mind. And it concludes by asking whether it is possible and what might the benefits be, if education was able to locate itself into the absurd so that it deliberately engaged ‘the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together’ (p. 50).

To answer this we need to examine, like Camus does in *The Myth*, to what extent we (or educational practices) ‘mask the evidence’ and suppress the absurd ‘by denying one of the terms of its equation’ (p. 50). This monograph asks the same question of education: in what ways does it too unintentionally suppress or celebrate, and what are the implications for the young mind in pursuing an existential education? And most importantly with reference to intentionality, if one believes in education as having potential and a role to play in absurd reasoning, how can it remain ‘on that dizzying crest’: what is the cost and investment of doing so.

#### ABSURD LEARNER

Thus, suicide provides an avenue for escaping an unreasonable and cumbersome existence. Yet, complete escape requires exiting the paradox in an attempt at existential transcendence. Such an attempt presupposes hope – at least the hope that such transcendence might provide a means of escape from the present existence. For this reason, Camus ultimately

denies the efficacy of suicide, for it requires giving up the absurd lucidity that makes life respectable. (Weddington, 2007, p. 120)

Hope is a pivotal concept in *The Myth*. Hope, as defined by Camus at the time of writing, was an individual escape from the absurd; a reconciliation of some sort. This type of hope is found in characters committed to universal truths, whether they be political or personal. Hope and nostalgia are acceptable responses to the absurd; Camus is rarely critical. *The Myth* accepts that ‘hope cannot be eluded for ever’ and *The Myth* could be summarised as a record of artists and others who were ‘beset [by hope] even those who wanted to be free of it’ (p. 102).

Resistance to the temptation offered by hope requires ‘unfailing alertness’ (p. 103). There is a section in *The Myth* introducing the ‘attitude’ against hope. It reads like pedagogy. The attitude is called *ephemeral creation* and it seems to have parallels with concepts and goals found across all types of educational writing. This discussion is in the section titled ‘Absurd Freedom’. This section revisits the fundamental existential challenge: *to leap beyond or to live ‘without appeal’*.

This leads Camus to posing his famous question of philosophical suicide. This too has relevance for education. Readers of Camus will be familiar with his characters that live a life without certainty, and they, rather than turning to suicide choose a life better lived: ‘at last man will again find there the wine of the absurd and the bread of indifference on which he feeds his greatness’ (p. 52). This positive response relies on a continuing consciousness of the absurd and a commitment to ‘keeping it alive’. But it also has *purposeful action*. It is through this peculiar (and at first glance contradictory) blend of indifference and commitment that we find both the outsider and perhaps, at the same time, a sense of belonging.

The central place that Camus gives to this choice (across his writing) suggests that a certain sort of freedom underpins the absurd. Perhaps he sees the *purpose* of freedom as that which will help individuals witness the absurd contradiction, which in turn leads them to make choices to revolt or leap (i.e. a means to authenticity). Awareness of the absurd does not one give us new freedom from it; one cannot use this freedom to ‘cross out’ the contradictions of the absurd (p. 51).

In *The Rebel* Camus (1956) advocates for a sense of unity as the ‘harmony of opposites’. He contrasts this with totality: the reduction and the ‘stamping out of differences’ (p. 234). In *The Myth* he similarly reflects on what absurd freedom means for our knowledge projects: its purpose is to return reflection to ‘what I already knew’. This means one cannot reject either the appetite

for unity or what I know of the ‘impossibility of reducing this world to a rationale and reasonable principle’ (1955a, p. 51).

This type of freedom is likely to negate the normal sense of the future as something we plan, project or contemplate. Our absurd freedom can do nothing for the future – it cannot make sense of it – it is settled in the present. This is because it does not escape the absurd: “authentic” freedom promises ‘permanent revolution’ (p. 53). Camus writes about historical figures and fictional characters who found this type of freedom and those that could not live within it. From the hysterical to the heroic.

To answer this; how we should as educators act in the face of the absurd – we need to compare the educational venture and the language and imagery of ‘living without appeal’. This latter freedom is ‘not an outburst of relief or of joy but rather a bitter acknowledgement of a fact’ (p. 65). The absurd in the context of the learner does not negate nor does it liberate; it just ‘binds’ differently.

#### ABSURD CREATION

What normally brings the individual into confrontation with his absurd condition, suggests Camus, is the awareness not of human mortality per se, but of his own personal mortality...However, this is not to say that the absurd is born out of an irrational response to the realisation of human mortality. While feelings of the absurd may thus be awoken, awareness of the absurd, Camus insists, is specifically a rational, intellectual discovery, deduced from recognition of the division between our expectations of the world and the world itself, unresponsive to those expectations. (Foley, 2008, p. 6)

Finishing with *Absurd Creation* – the working hypothesis is that this is the closest thing to a Camusean pedagogy we find in *The Myth*. Absurd creation comes from a commitment to remain faithful to the condition one finds oneself *and others*: the limits and barriers discussed above.

Although absurd creation ‘begins with lucid indifference’ (p. 87) it demands we find meaning through knowledge: meaning that leads to action, and action embedded by principles of the absurd. Camus believes this need not mean we lose either lucid indifference or the sense of the absurd. Absurd creation is not the outright rejection of parameters but the commitment to them even if transient: ‘such men know to begin with, and then their whole effort is to examine, to enlarge, and to enrich the ephemeral island on which they have just landed’ (p. 87).

These are certain lofty goals for education practice. But it does seem that absurd creation has significant links to concepts already found in education. In some ways it sounds like a type of learning process underpinned by a deliberate act of reflection. Camus describes that before creation follows a pause – that space where the mind acknowledges the absurd contradiction and implications. The absurd stays with us. There might be an argument to link this to the educational attribute of contemplation; the deliberate taking stock of the distinctness of a moment. Camus uses the word ‘describing’ when he unpacks the process of absurd creation. This might be a form of education – how to use the absurd as a device for those who ‘wish to live a life of conscious clarity’ (Sagi, 1994, p. 279).

Read this way we might start to draw Camus further into the educational discourses. He talks of absurd creation as a place where explanation is of less worth than the sensation of seeing ‘diversity’. Camus is arguing that recognition of the absurd can help us understand the existential. It shatters and fragments: he talks of seeing in the ‘wonderful and childish world of the creator’ (p. 88). In *The Myth* Camus is starting to describe educational attributes: lucid indifference, sculpture in clay, describe and enlarge.

He also states that ‘the work of art is born of the intelligence’s refusal to reason the concrete’ (p. 89). Again this resonates with the critical purposes of education; to search and see anew. This creation is not transcending – the lucid mind always knows that ‘creating or not creating changes nothing... the absurd creator does not prize his work’ (p. 90). Camus is instead arguing for an art form that does not have ‘pretension to the eternal’ (p. 90). He describes moments constructed deliberately where ‘expression begins and thought ends’ and perhaps, in practice, it is a moment where we find thought ‘renouncing of its prestige’ (p. 90).

Again, as a working hypothesis, this language suggests a pedagogy of the absurd which has both push and pull affects: it offers the promise of a world remaining of ‘which man is the sole master’ and yet at the same time tempts consciousness with ‘the illusion of another world’ (p. 106). But at the same time it does not hide us from ‘the whole extent of [our] wretched condition’ (p. 109). Perhaps for education as for the Greeks, this lucidity might ‘crown [our] victory’ (p. 109).

For now we will take this as the monograph’s working hypothesis. That the absurd has a relationship to education:

*that the absurd is educational and that education is absurd.*